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UN 2023 Water Conference Side Event

Roundtable: Empowering Women, Youth and Indigenous Persons to Accelerate Global Water Security in the Water Action Decade

(Old title: Concrete Path To Empower Women, Youth, and Indigenous Persons to Accelerate Global Water Security in the Water Action Decade)

March 24, 2023, 8:30 – 10:00 AM, Riverview Room, Floor 28,
Millennium Hilton New York One UN Plaza Hotel

Organized by:

World Bank (Water Global Practice); Women in Water Diplomacy Network (and associated partner organizations); Water for Women Fund – Australia; Water Youth Network; Instituto para el Diálogo Global y la Cultura del Encuentro– Argentina; UNESCO WWAP; WaterAid (East Africa Regional Office); Global Water Partnership – South Africa; International Water Association; Xylem; American Water Works Association; Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; GIZ; University of Technology Sydney

TWO PAGE MAXIMUM

Background on the event (one paragraph)

Extensive data shows that the slow progress in achieving SDG 6 has a disproportionate impact on women, youth, indigenous persons, and other marginalized groups. However, these groups are not able to voice their needs and priorities as they are typically excluded from decision-making processes. Achieving more inclusive decision-making is key to accelerating progress in areas as diverse as water quality, the adoption of carbon-neutral irrigation practices, and to achieving universal access in water and sanitation. Research has shown that one of the more effective ways to increase voice is by making institutions themselves more diverse, particularly at decision-making levels. The objective of the event was to discuss how to achieve *quantifiable* progress in women, youth and indigenous' persons representation in decision-making in water resource management institutions, in water supply and sanitation utilities and service providers (including in the private sector), in transboundary water organizations, and in community-based water organizations.

Water Action Agenda (one paragraph, if possible, please include the link to your commitment in the [Water Action Agenda database](#))

Key Issues discussed (5- 8 bullet points)

- The discussion was framed by the experience of the partnership platform (Equal Aqua) hosted by the World Bank and 20 partners, which includes benchmarking, pooling of knowledge and tools, and technical assistance on gender diversity in water institutions. The session focused on five interactive thematic panels as follows:
- ***Scaling up gender equality in water supply and sanitation utilities:*** There was consensus on the need to further address the data gaps on gender and broader diversity in water and sanitation utilities. Highlighted examples drew from leadership targets for women in water utilities in Argentina; empowerment of women in Brazil's private WASH sector; and gender commitments in Iraq. Despite some slow progress, regional variations and the lack of attention to assessing shifting gender norms continue to pose challenges.
- ***Increasing gender diversity and concrete targets in water resource management (WRM) and river basin organizations (RBOs):*** Enhancing gender diversity in RBOs and WRM, as in water utilities, is constrained by fewer women in STEM, less flexible work options, absence of gender indicators in performance measurements, resource constraints particularly in low-medium countries, and the predominance of high level governmental political appointees who reflect the gender diversity of their respective countries.
- ***Enhancing voice and representation of indigenous communities in water institutions and water decision-making:*** Capturing when engagement of indigenous communities is resulting in empowerment tends to be context-specific, can include innovative indicators developed by communities themselves, and reflect the holistic role that water plays in many indigenous communities. A cultural governance approach building on cultural and qualitative indicators and an appropriate monitoring system could track progress within a broader global context. Effective engagement is facilitated by stepping out of the role of holder of knowledge and technology and instead assuming the role of learner of different value systems and indigenous knowledge around water.

- ***Enhancing women's leadership and decision-making in water at community/user level (water user associations, disaster risk management and flood management committees):*** While quantitative data is sometimes available to measure women's representation in local water committees, there is a lack of more holistic approaches and measures beyond specific projects' horizons. For example, going beyond tokenistic inclusion, enhancing women's voice in such committees requires also looking at voice in supporting government and policy structures, opportunities for economic empowerment, and social and cultural barriers and norms.
- ***Enhancing youth diversity in water institutions:*** A generational transition of knowledge is key to accelerate water action under a changing climate. It is estimated that 10 million new jobs will be required in the water sector by 2030 to maintain the current services. If the sector does not become attractive to youth, it risks a slowdown in progress in the water agenda, or worse, backtracking. Data gaps remain (most recent data from 2015-2017). There is also a need to better track the effectiveness of outreach to youth in schools to generating more youth entering the sector.

Key recommendations for action (5 - 6 bullet points)

- Institutions and organizations active in promoting diversity and inclusion in the water sector need to work collaboratively to strengthen and coalesce the agenda (including by sharing resources and experiences and moving towards common metrics) to jointly track whether we are making progress.
- Data collection on diversity in water institutions can be ramped up in a number of areas (data collection further expanded to the national level on water utilities, application of benchmarking approaches to water resource management/River Basin Organizations, stock-takes of youth representation in the water sector). In addition, for more sustained tracking governments can improve data systems in areas such as the number of women in WASH decision-making, and in Disaster Risk Management Committees. Benchmarking should be expanded to create a sense of competition amongst the different institutions to adopt better social inclusion and better gender practices, and to enhance accountability.
- But tracking voice and influence in water decision-making will require going beyond the data, to focus on holistic approaches, capturing shifts in norms, and reflecting the knowledge, values, and innovative community-driven approaches to measuring voice of indigenous populations.